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RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0136
RHMFIS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 003601

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PARIS FOR WALLER, LONDON FOR TSOU, AMMAN FOR KANESHIRO

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM SY LE

SUBJECT: TFLE01: SYRIA DAILY SITREP 07 FOR SUNDAY, JULY 23, 2006

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶11. (S) Summary: Contacts are reporting a dramatic rise in anti-American sentiment in Syria over the past ten days. The influential director of the Abu Noor Institute, Sheikh Saleh Kuftaro, called upon the SARG "to open the borders with Israel for resistance" during Friday prayers on July 21. Other sermons indirectly criticized various unnamed Arab regimes for their failure to support the resistance in Lebanon. DAO reported that UNDOF Force Commander, LTG Sharma carried a message late last week from the Syrian Minister of Defense to the Israel Defense Force, stating that Syria had received previously delivered IDF messages and that Syria would do nothing to upset the status-quo. The Syrian Minister of Information was quoted July 23 as saying that Syria will enter the war if Israel invades Lebanon and approaches Syria. The small force of seven uniformed Syrian police that contribute to SARG security elements guarding the Embassy have been withdrawn from their guard posts around the Embassy. The Embassy's designated MFA contact told Charge he was unaware of the change but discounted its significance, given the presence of other forces. End Summary.

POLITICAL/MILITARY

¶12. (C) The following is a political update:

-- Anti-American sentiment seems to be increasing dramatically, even from within the Christian community, according to political contacts (septel). There is widespread grassroots and elite support for Hizballah, although some members of the elite are quietly questioning whether the SARG has overly embraced the Shiite group to the extent that the country is now hostage to the group's political fate, according to these contacts. Some of these Syrian elite predicted that Israel might target Syria militarily as a way to widen the conflict and distract attention from its inability to score a decisive victory over Hizballah.

-- The influential director of the Abu Noor Institute, Sheikh Saleh Kuftaro (son of Syria's late Grand Mufti), called upon the SARG "to open the borders with Israel for resistance" during Friday prayers on July 21, according to information received by an Embassy Public Diplomacy FSN. Kuftaro strongly condemned the "political position of George Bush, Tony Blair and Javier Solana," describing the three as "malicious crusaders." After the prayers, a crowd of a hundred people took to the streets outside the institute, raising photos of Syria's President Bashar al-Asad and

Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah, according to POL FSN.

-- In their Friday sermons, other imams condemned what they called the savage Israeli aggression against the Lebanese and Palestinian peoples, noting that it was taking place with American support. They also hinted at the cowardice of various unnamed Arab regimes that have not supported the resistance in Lebanon, according to contacts.

-- Minister of Information Mohsen Bilal was quoted July 23 as saying that Syria will enter the war if Israel invades Lebanon and approaches Syria.

-- Syria's Deputy FM Faisal Mikdad was quoted on July 22 as saying that the SARG was ready to open a dialogue with the U.S. to resolve the crisis in Lebanon, on the condition that Washington engages on the question of Israeli occupation of neighboring lands.

-- Syria's PermRep to the UN mission in New York, Bashar al-Ja'fari, called on the Security Council to stop immediately the Israel aggression on the Lebanese and Palestinian peoples, according to the official Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). Ja'fari urged the council to pressure Israel into an immediate cease-fire.

-- An official Syrian mouthpiece, Tishreen newspaper, sharply criticized comments by the U.S. Secretary of State suggesting that the USG would not back an immediate cease-fire in Lebanon. A July 22 Tishreen editorial, voicing sentiment that has become widespread in the past week, stated that "We are not surprised that a decision rejecting a cease-fire has come from Washington and Tel Aviv, as this is an American war with Israeli tools."

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¶3. (S) The following is a military update:

-- According to one source, UNDOF Force Commander, LTG Sharma had carried a message late last week from the Syrian Minister of Defense to the Israel Defense Force stating the Syria had received previously delivered IDF messages, which said the IDF did not intend to attack Syria unless provoked, and that Syria would do nothing to upset the status-quo. This was the first Syrian response to IDF messages passed via UNDOF, according to the DAO.

SECURITY

¶4. (C) The following is a security update:

-- The small force of seven uniformed, unarmed Syrian police that contribute to SARG plainclothes security elements guarding the Embassy have been permanently withdrawn from their guard posts around the Embassy, according to the RSO. Security officials charged with protecting the Embassy told the RSO that these uniformed police were of limited value in protecting the Embassy. The Charge called on the Chief of Protocol, the Embassy's designated MFA contact, and asked if the SARG's intention was to deliver a message to the USG by removing the uniformed police. The MFA official professed to be unaware of any decision to reduce the SARG-provided security for the Embassy, and promised Charge to inquire with the appropriate authorities and get back to him as soon as he had any information. He claimed that there is still plenty of plainclothes security around the embassy, and pointed to the police response to demonstrations in recent days as evidence that the Embassy has no cause for concern.

CONSULAR

¶5. (U) The following is a consular update:

-- The Consular Section opened on an extraordinary basis from

10 a.m. - 1 p.m. Saturday for American Citizen Services,
assisting five walk-ins.

-- The Section continues to receive a heavy volume of phone calls, ranging from requests for subsistence, child abduction cases, and inquiries about airline availability.

ECONOMIC

16. (SBU) The following is an economic update:

-- Business contacts have reported growing frustration with the lack of a coordinated SARG effort to direct aid to needy Lebanese in Syria. The Minister of Social Affairs and Labor has the lead on coordinating aid efforts and is helpful to those who are able to reach her, but access is unpredictable, according to contacts.

-- A committee to assist with the provision of services to displaced Lebanese met July 22 to set up branch committees throughout Syria, according to a SANA report.

-- The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) is heading up a fund-raising campaign for needy Lebanese with some anonymous donors contributing up to USD 100,000, according to a Syrian businessman, who noted that anti-money-laundering procedures were in place.

-- Two planeloads of Algerian humanitarian aid for Lebanon arrived July 22 at Damascus International Airport, carrying food, medicines and medical equipment, as well as tents, blankets and generators, according to media reports. The Algerian Embassy in Damascus was coordinating with the Syrian authorities and the SARC to deliver the shipment, accompanied by 16 Algerian doctors, over land into Lebanon.

-- The Damascus International Airport appears to have recovered to a significant degree from the overflow situation evident after the initial outbreak of fighting in Lebanon. Recent visits to the airport suggest that the airport has cleared a significant number of the passengers who were waiting for flights. While travel agents report wait time for flights of two to three weeks for &economy8 fares, other contacts report that a limited number of seats are

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available on the day of flights, on some airlines that have recently increased the number of flights into Syria. Overbooking and other factors are preventing any more advance notice of such availability. .

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